

# Grasping the Full Meaning of our Educational Vision

Miriam Jansen, SSND

St. Louis Province Day, August 12, 2006

I want to thank you for inviting me to offer today's reflections. I must say standing here I feel a bit overwhelmed on many levels. Recently I was introduced to a song by Carrie Newcomer called "Betty's Diner". It reminds me of this gathering this morning. In the song the diner becomes a place where people from all walks of life drop in and share with her what's on their minds; it's over the coffee, the eggs and toast that life is poured out, blessed and restored. The unraveling of their ups and downs, joys and sorrows, restores their well being. The refrain goes like this: *"Here we are, all in one place, the wants and wounds of the human race, despair and hope sit face to face, when you come in from the cold. Fill your cup with something kind, eggs and toast like bread wine."*<sup>1</sup>

Well, here we are all in one place, at home in our chapel, we bear in our bodies, minds and hearts the wants and wounds of the human race, despair and hope sit face to face when we come in from the August heat. So, today we fill our cups with something kind, the strength we gather from each other, the noontime lunch like bread and wine, the words of life are shared and with a new sense of hope we are restored. We share our humanity and our divinity with each other. It is an experience of community, of communion. Let today be like a trip to Betty's Diner. An ordinary event that takes us to tomorrow with renewed courage.

We know life is not defined in discrete categories. It's impossible to consider one aspect of our lives without spilling into another. So it is when we try to grasp the full meaning of our educational vision. It is impossible, in large part because it is already so much a part of who we are and how we are in the world. How can anyone put words around the mystery that is life and love poured out in ministry. I claim no expertise on the subject, just increasing years of experience with it. I always agonize over trying to put words around the wonders of our educational charism. How can I capture the depth and breadth of Theresa's dream? What does it mean? What does it mean *now*? We know things need to live a long time in our souls before they become part of our daily lives. Then we face the challenge of trying to put words on such a wondrous spiritual reality.

We know that communicating God's love lies at the heart of the SSND educational story. We know the spiritual energy of the story continues to compel us to do more than we can imagine. It's a prism of grace, like pure beams of sunlight being cast upon the earth. We know this because we have felt it and we have seen it at work. We have been warmed by its light. The surprising piece is that this spiritual energy resides in us. We can never underestimate the power for good that moves through us. Our vision moves us to greatness. The sacred story begun so long ago is still unfinished; we are continually writing it with our lives. I am reminded of Sister Virginia Geiger, a legend at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland. She taught philosophy for 60 years at Notre Dame. She was a modern day version of the Energizer Bunny. Virginia died a little over a year ago. When you met her in the hall

or around campus and asked how she was, the response was always the same. "I'm excellent, on the way to magnificent."

There was no road map for our 19th Century beginnings. It was the driving desire in the hearts of Father Whitman, Blessed Theresa and Father Job to do something about the glaring needs they saw in their society that gave birth to our Congregation. They were committed to challenging the culture and to bringing about change. It was God's action in their lives that broke forth into the world and has become our story. It was God's action in their lives that gave rise to the SSND educational vision.

A vision is a kind of blueprint which embodies the myth, the sacred story. It's always a little beyond our grasp. Blessed Theresa and Caroline, perhaps without fully realizing it, were somehow able to articulate a vision of God's desire for our world and apply it to the school context. They took the Christian message, their view of reality and a pedagogical direction that supported their Christian beliefs and created an educational vision. They wanted to set things right in the world and they chose to do it through education. There are elements in this vision that are universal, enduring and generative.

I think we sometimes forget how committed Theresa was to transforming 19<sup>th</sup> century Bavaria. Integrated into her educational and religious mission was a cultural and civic work. Operating schools changed every aspect of her life and work. Her work as an educator, took her into the very heart of her society. She became embedded in the world though not of it.

She spent long days in the classroom, teaching the values, skills and knowledge young girls needed to become good mothers and productive members of the society. She was the fund raiser and the real estate agent looking for new places to establish schools for the poor and the needy. She knew the right people and she didn't hesitate to develop relationships that promoted her ministry. Think about it, what she did, day in and day out, changed lives, changed towns and villages; it transformed her society even as it shaped her vocation. Her life became a constant interplay between the human and the divine. She became an active contemplative taking her ministry to prayer and prayer to her ministry. Her life of constant contemplation and action holds out a marvelous model for us.

We know from reading and rereading the lives of Father Michael Whitman, Father Sebastian Job, Blessed Theresa and Mother Caroline that for each of them, the outward journey and the inward journey were a single path. It was the congruence between their inner and outer lives that provided the resources they needed to deal with the challenges of their times. Our educational vision was born of this rhythmic journey. The heartbeat of the educational vision resides in our souls and is made visible in our acts.

### **Apostolic Spirituality**

We are *in Mission for Mission*. We are in the world to identify and foster that which makes all things one and to confront with the Gospel that which does not. Like Blessed Theresa, our sanctification will be worked out by being and doing the Mission of Jesus. We will become holy through the apostolic orientation we have embraced. We work

out our call to holiness in the marketplace, on the streets, in the parish or school where we live and love and where to a large extent, we discover God. And for those of us who call ourselves School Sisters, ours is an apostolic spirituality which cannot be wholly separated from our educational ministry.

Our apostolic spirituality sheds light on the darkness in the world. The Lord must be deeply active in our souls if we are to be light in the darkness. There must always be a marketplace and a *prie-dieu* in the life of an apostle. We can't give up on the struggle of being an active contemplative. Yet we know how difficult it is; split-level living is full of lots of stair climbing. It's never all down or all up—never all work or all prayer. Harmoniously integrating our work and our prayer was the plea of Blessed Theresa to her sisters and is the call and challenge of *You Are Sent*. (SSND Holy Rule) We live a single whole. The rhythm of our lives must include now the one and now the other. We long for the integration of the two and know that it is the struggle of a lifetime. I pray it is a gift that comes with aging!

Parker Palmer in his book, *The Active Life*, writes that “contemplation and action are so intertwined that features we associate with one are always found at the heart of the other. Contemplation becomes a way of changing consciousness that may have more impact on the world than our actions can have. Contemplation and action are integrated at the root, and their root is in our ceaseless drive to be fully alive.”<sup>2</sup> Together action and contemplation transforms everything.

Apostolic religious are committed to a kind of contemplation that gives rise to transformative action. We can't help ourselves. Palmer goes on to describe apostolic action that transforms,

To be fully alive is to act. Through action we both express and learn something of who we are, of the kind of world we have or want. Action, like sacrament, is the visible form of an invisible spirit, an outward manifestation of an inward power. When we act, we not only express what is in us and help give shape to the world; we also receive what is outside us, and we reshape our inner selves. When we act, the world acts back and we and the world are co-created.<sup>3</sup>

Transformation occurs.

YAS presents a vision of the person, the educator, and the world. It takes Blessed Theresa's vision and re-conceptualizes our ministry for the modern world. It says consider yourself first and fundamentally, an educator, a transformer, a doer of justice. We are educators in all that we are and do. We are educators called to embrace a worldwide vision, to open ourselves to see, really see, the world with global eyes; to know the world with a global mind, and to love the world with a global heart.

Take a look around at the world in which we live. We are blessed to live at the beginning of this Third Millennium. Have you ever known a time that needed more love, more justice, more respect for human life and human rights, and more responsible action? Our call to be transformed and to transform the world through education has never been more relevant.

From the *Spirit of the Constitutions* through the 1865 and 1925 Rules and in the text of *You Are Sent* we see the interplay of spirituality and learning. Our changing historical reality and the call of Vatican II provided the opportunity for us to look at our place in the Church and the world.

In 1970 the SSND definition of education was in need of cultural expansion; it needed to expand in order to challenge the culture to greater depth of meaning. We knew we needed to do the “inner work of education. We needed to take on new thinking, change our attitudes and adjust our behaviors.

YAS, in 1982, pointed the Congregation in the direction of transformation, the transformation of the self, the society and the world for the good of all. It expressed very clearly our commitment to work for a more just and truly humane world. This document was to become a formative influence not only for the members, but for all of those SSNDs touched through their ministry. It challenged us to think differently about the world and our place in it. It called us to open wide our arms and invite others in to share more directly in our spirituality and our ministry. Having you, our colleagues and associates, here today, gives evidence to the important role you play in our educational enterprise. You are our partners in ministry—our partners on this spiritual journey toward transformation.

It’s been 20 years since YAS received final approbation from the Holy See. The world looked differently in 1986 than it does now. Think of the changes that have occurred since this document was written - to name but a few: the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of Eastern Europe, the rise of China and India, 9-11 and the rise of terrorism, the reconfiguration initiatives in the Congregation and the birth of the Districts of Africa and Latin America, the internet and instant communication, growing global poverty and environmental degradation. Our experience is always ahead of our language. So we see further elaborations about our place in the world articulated in the *Call to Transformation*. Yet, the heart of the matter as expressed in YAS remains true and relevant and calls us to consider who we are NOW. The vision was written down; it’s time has come. Our task is to be true to our call even as we articulate the charism in new ways in these new days.

A day like today provides time and space for us to contemplate the fundamental question: Who are we anyway and what are we about? In preparing for today I kept asking myself, where and how do I start? Everything is related to everything else. Everything is important? I chose to spend this morning looking at the definition of education as articulated in paragraph 22 of YAS. This afternoon I hope to take these general reflections and bring them forward with a few more challenges.

When someone says tell me in 25 words or less what your vision of education is my head begins to swirl. What can I say in 25 words? Please give me at least 100 words!. I have to lay out the premise, define the terms, situate education in a particular context and then maybe I can begin to explain what the School Sisters of Notre Dame believe about education. Slow down—wait a minute—do I really need all 100 words? Believe it or not, our definition of education has 28 words in it. It’s a powerful statement with a great deal of hidden meaning. Let’s consider it. Let’s unpack the richness of this definition.

### **For us, education means**

Education is our way of being in an increasingly diverse and rapidly changing world and it is our piece—our contribution—to building God’s kingdom. From our tradition we know that our educational mission has a two-fold purpose - learning and believing. The real power of learning comes when we connect the two.

As educators in the SSND tradition we know that the development and dissemination of knowledge will always be important, but the development of the human heart and spirit was the critical work of SSND educators in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and continues to be the critical work of SSND educators in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The problems of our day will not yield to knowledge alone. They require the practice of virtues that are intimately bound up in our SSND tradition: truthfulness, integrity, respect and care for one another. So spirituality is part of true learning.

We have made enormous progress in human knowledge. We have mapped the four corners of Earth and even explored the infinity of space, and we have investigated the inner world of our own DNA and named the very stuff of human life but with T.S. Eliot we must wonder, “Where is the wisdom we’ve lost in the knowledge?” We know more about our world and ourselves than human beings have ever known. But we have not made this same progress in the moral and spiritual realm. We have been unable or unwilling to bring moral and ethical measures to bear on the most important questions of our times. Why are so many of us hungry and homeless? Why do we continue to settle differences with violence and war? Why are a few so rich and so many so poor? Reason alone is unable to provide us with the answers to these complex problems, the most important challenges of our times.

Our vocation as educators places us at the center of these challenges. It places us at the center of the struggle to make meaning of the complexity and to transform reality by bringing faith to bear on that reality. As Christian educators we must assign faith to meaning. We are, or must become, ministers of meaning, restorers of vision. We must ask how our faith can shape thinking, offer inspiration and provide a model for living. We are called to apply sacred criteria to human conduct, to see things through the heart of God. As Christian educators we’re called to bring faith to bear on our present age, on our ever changing culture.

Edmund O’Sullivan, in his book, Transformative Learning, reminds us “that culture is a human construction and it is our human responsibility to create and re-create culture.”<sup>4</sup> As educators we invite others to engage in this creative process. Education is, in large part, about bringing a plurality of meanings experienced in our culture into some kind of larger synthesis, a coherent world view. This is a work not just of the mind but also of the soul. Our culture places enormous value on the intellect and less value on the heart. Yet it is in the heart where the human being is unified--integrated. Education is, or should be, more about soul-making than credentialing, more about making a life than making a living. That’s what Blessed Theresa did; that’s what SSND educators do. We stand at the intersection of the personal and public trying to help individuals weave a more integrated life, trying to build a better world. Engagement in the educational mission is a divine and human task.

The story is told of the Zen master, “O Holy One”, the disciple said, “How shall I know the difference between knowledge and enlightenment?” And the Only One said, “When you have knowledge, you light a torch to find your way. When you have enlightenment, you become the torch that shows the way.”

Blessed Theresa and Mother Caroline became the torch. Just imagine how many times Mother Caroline walked on this ground, 320 East Ripa, and prayed to know the future—to see the way. All around her social and economic forces were changing the North American landscape. She didn’t flee from the turmoil; she embraced it. She and her sisters became the torch—they became agents of social change. They made a tremendous social contribution. Mother Caroline left her footprint across North America. Her spirit and vision is woven into the history of Catholic education. Caroline’s faith informed her practice. She knew that education was a powerful force for transformation. Her educational vision and methodology was about soul making. It was always the interplay of the divine and human.

### **Enabling persons to reach the fullness of their potential**

As SSND educators our commitment is to the passion and possibility inherent in the human person and in our world. SSND education is all about empowering individuals to reach the fullness of their potential and to exercise that potential to build God’s kingdom here and now. It’s true, today human beings know so much more and can do so much more but it does not necessarily follow that we exercise our human potential in any more responsible ways. To “enable others to reach the fullness of their potential means” that we must help them to choose to live responsibly and sustainably. To be fully human, to have reached the fullness of our potential as children of God, is to find that point where personal freedom and social responsibility meet.

As SSND educators we’re about the holistic development of the human person. Whether we call it *Virtus et Scientia*, faith and learning, knowledge and integrity and wholistic learning, or simply SSND education, we believe that no part of the development of the human person can be ignored. Each person enjoys talents, competencies, and potentialities that can be developed and exercised in responsible ways for the good of society—the global community and our planetary home. We may have multiplied human potentialities since 1847. The explosion of knowledge, the geometric growth of information creates a new stage for human learning. But knowledge without wisdom is empty. In fact, life in an age with almost unlimited access to information requires that we give special attention to the importance of faith and love in the development of the human heart and spirit.

We know that full human development is at its heart a relational process. Relationship building and engagement in various forms of community shapes the individuals’ view of self, the other and the world. Reaching one’s potential occurs in relation to others in community. So our educational ministry must always be a relational enterprise. It is this connected communitarian learning and living that transforms lives. Such an approach to education predisposes the individual to think critically and lovingly, act wisely and work for a more just and truly human world. In 1847 these values found expression in our ministry in rural America, small towns and villages, primarily through classroom instruction. In 2006, in an age where needs are global; relationship building must embrace all of our brothers and sisters and all of creation. Today we are coming

to understand ourselves in relation to the larger story of the Cosmos. We are part of a greater whole that is all of God's creation. Our commitment to the holistic development of the human person has not changed but today its embrace must be global and planetary.

### **As individuals created in God's image**

Catholic Social Teaching puts it this way: The human person is the clearest reflection of God among us.<sup>5</sup> Valuing the human person is the centerpiece of our educational vision.

So much in our culture tells us differently. Popular culture suggests that you have to achieve and earn dignity; that we are not worthy until and unless we demonstrate that we can do something well, something that is valued. Achievement has become the basis for acceptance and the full measure of a person's dignity and worth.

David Purpel laments these common sentiments in his work, The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education. He says that "We live in a world where personal dignity is not inherent and inalienable but is negotiable."<sup>6</sup> He goes on to say that in this time "Personal dignity is a reward in exchange for achievement."<sup>7</sup> Personal worth is continuously subject to trial and examination. Some are deemed worthy and other not. That is not what we say. In our educational vision we do not measure the dignity of those we serve. We do not shut some out and welcome others because society deems them worthy. Everyone counts; everyone has a place at the table. This is pretty powerful; it's very counter-cultural. So we must ask ourselves, who is or is not in our field of vision?

Locked inside of every human being is the image of God. Locked inside, as well, is the potential for love; to love and to be loved. Blessed Theresa and Mother Caroline knew what love felt like. They stood in astonishment at how much God loved them. From the inside out, they experienced God's love and it was, as if for the first time, everyday, they kept pouring this love out in their interactions with others. They had this driving desire to let others know how much they were valued and loved. That's what we are called to do in our educational ministry. Just think of one day in the life of the Congregation, the thousands of SSNDs and those with whom they minister around the world, pouring out God's love to others. The millions and millions of ways they are embracing the cries of the world through those they serve: children, young people, single moms, the elderly, the poor and oppressed, the homeless and those who know so little of the love of others and on and on--simply by embracing the God they meet in each of them. Think of the power that resides in the words, "I believe in you," "You can do this," and "You are loved." It is our responsibility to sustain and nourish the God incarnate in each and every person through our service poured out through our educational ministry.

### **And assisting them to direct their gifts toward building the earth**

Our definition of education places us squarely in the world and requires that we become agents of its transformation. We are not only sacred beings; we are social beings as well. And this brings with it responsibilities for the common good and for the well-being of all of creation. The originating graces of the congregation take on global expression in this time and in this place.

Our faith and our mission are profoundly social. We are one global family of God. In this time and this place global solidarity must be at the heart of our educational process. Globalization has caused all of us to wake up in the morning and realize that things aren't like they use to be; our neighborhoods have changed. Our neighbors are speaking different languages; they don't look like us. They don't pray like us. This single realization has changed everything. It calls into question long established ways of relating to our neighbors and it turns ethnic diversity and global awareness, into the stuff of everyday life. So how do we get along in the global neighborhood? As Thomas Friedman puts it, "Global integration has raced ahead of education... We know "of" one another more than ever, but we still don't know that much "about" one another."<sup>8</sup> Understanding diverse cultures and understanding cultures as diverse, developing intercultural skills, understanding global processes and preparing for local and global citizenship are capacities that are absolutely essential for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ours is in many ways a borderless world; we share the virtues of all cultures and we share there challenges.

In Learning: The Treasure Within, the report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, the Commission affirms that education has to take on the difficult task of turning cultural diversity into a positive force for transformation. The growing inequality created by poverty and exclusion creates deep divides. The social and moral crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century spreads violence and, threatens the cohesion, the unity that is inherent in God's creation. Education can uncover that essential unity and heal the division. Education can promote cohesion if it will foster pluralism. Everyone should be able to find their place in the community.<sup>9</sup>

SSND education must be intercultural education that genuinely contributes to building social cohesion and peace. Above all, it must reject exclusion of every kind and type and educate global citizens. Citizens of the world are capable and experienced in the ways of diverse cultures, comfortable with multiple perspectives. They know who they are and at the same time know they can become even more. They care deeply about the human family, their brothers and sisters. They carefully tend Earth and act responsibly toward it. Developing global citizenship is essential for fostering global solidarity. It must be a hallmark of an SSND education. This is our agenda. This is the call of the SSND educational vision at work in our world today

The words of Parker Palmer bear repeating, "Action, like sacrament, is the visible form of an invisible spirit, an outward manifestation of an inward power. When we act, we not only express what is in us and help give shape to the world; we also receive what is outside us, and we reshape our inner selves. When we act, the world acts back and we and the world are co-created."<sup>10</sup> And transformation occurs. We must ask ourselves: Does our activity give a sacramental character to the world? Does our educational ministry really transform?

Within each period of history, in each generation we are called back to our original blessing, to touch again, the spiritual gifting of our founding. When we think about all the hungers of the world, the endless pull to be everywhere, we must be brought back to who we are. We must touch again the truest part of ourselves. The future of our

ministry will be shaped by our fidelity to our founding charism. That's no easy task. It is not easy to maintain our way amidst the winds of change.

I am reminded of the stories about the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century farmers who survived the blinding blizzards on the northern plains. Imagine the wind is howling fiercely, the snow is biting and blinding. It is a dangerous and life threatening situation. Farmers would actually tie a rope from the house to the barn so as not to lose their way when the snows blew in. Northern plains blizzards created total white outs. The farmers knew that without the rope they could easily lose their way and before long fall into the heavy snow only to be found weeks later after the blizzard had past. The unlucky ones lost their way because they lost the rope. We need to hold tight to the rope. Our paths are not always clear and they are seldom simply linear roads between home and barn, but we do have compass points. We must not lose sight of our originating vision. We cannot afford to get separated from our own soul. Our survival and the efficacy of our ministry are dependent on our ability to hold on to the rope of our originating educational vision.

The old Japanese saying rings true: "You can't go deep by digging a thousand holes." We put our stake in the ground a long time ago. We've committed our selves to work for the transformation of persons through education especially for youth, women, the poor and marginalized. Now our vision of the human person is one in solidarity with all of our brothers and sisters, the whole of humanity and all of creation. That's the picture that must be in our heads—that's the rope that is tied the future.

As we move toward restructuring there will be many opportunities to see how we are connecting the vision that resides in our hearts with the service that we provide to God's people—to the whole of creation. We will be standing along side one another in new ways on old soil, sacred ground, fertile with meaning. The power that resides in our sacred soil is ready for a breakthrough moment. We are encountering the divine and human in new ways. The charism yearns for new expression; we are the ones who must reinvent it for these times. Where some see loss we see gain. Where some see death we see life; where some see difficulty we see opportunity. It's not about what we are giving up but we are able to do together. It is a breakthrough moment for our ministry. It is a movement toward greater solidarity in the congregation. It can be our gift to the global community. Let us not miss the moment.

So we end where we began asking the question anew, "What is the SSND educational vision in this time and this place?" How does one describe this spiritual reality? As we explore the SSND definition of education and gain new insight into its meaning we see these characteristics: communitarian, holistic, transformative, faith-filled, spiritual, and global. It is this and so much more...

#### Works Cited

- <sup>1</sup> Carrie Newcomer, Betty's Diner (Cambridge, MA.: Rounder Records Corp., 2004).
- <sup>2</sup> Parker Palmer, The Active Life (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 16-17.
- <sup>3</sup> Palmer, 17.

- <sup>4</sup> Edmund O'Sullivan, Transformative Learning (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 273.
- <sup>5</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (Vaticana, Libreria Editrice, 2004), 62.
- <sup>6</sup> David Purpel, The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1989), 34.
- <sup>7</sup> Purpel, 34.
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, The Lexus and the Olive Tree (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 31.
- <sup>9</sup> Jacques Delors et al., eds., Learning: The Treasure Within (Paris, France: UNESCO, 1996), 53-58.
- <sup>10</sup> Palmer, 17.